DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 063 CS 206 574

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TITLE Effective Composition Teachers.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; High Schools; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teaching Styles; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; Writing Research

ABSTRACT

To be effective, composition teachers should keep four things in mind. First, writing is as much a process as a product. To understand this, teachers must themselves write, so that they will experience the satisfaction of discovering ideas and viewpoints. Second, individual students' composing processes should be carefully identified before any intervention is attempted. This can be accomplished by talking with students and observing them while they are writing. Students will be better able to accommodate new processes, such as preparing outlines, if these are integrated with the students' existing processes. Third, effective teachers need to keep up with current research in composition and rhetorical theory. This research should, however, be considered in light of the teacher's own experience and the findings applied to the teachers' classes to test validity. Finally, effective teachers must realize that, because many professions are accessible without textbook-correct writing, they need to make something special out of the act of writing for their students. They can communicate much about writing through their classroom behavior or teaching style, and by viewing writing in a way that encourages their own continuing development and that of their students. (HTH)

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EFFECTIVE COMPOSITION TEACHERS

Whether composition teachers teach two, three or more writing classes a semester, their schedules assure the day is not long enough: papers, conferences, classes, research, papers, and more papers. The majority survive, but often just barely. Yet for some individuals, satisfaction and accomplishment overrule frustration: these individuals see composition courses benefiting not only their students, but also themselves. They possess certain knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that, in addition to the individual strengths each brings to the classroom, make them effective composition teachers. What is this knowledge? What are these abilities and attitudes? While answers will vary, I believe there are some common ones, and I'd like to characterize them.

Knowledge

There are at least three things I believe effective teachers of composition should keep in mind: (1) writing is as much pro-

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cess as product, (2) individuals' composing processes should be carefully identified before any intervention is attempted, and (3) familiarity with current research in composing is essential, but shouldn't preclude reliance on teachers' own experience.

To understand both process and product views of writing, teachers of composition must write themselves. They might keep a personal journal, try the assignments they give students, or define their philosophies and experience in articles written for other teachers. As a result, they experience some of the satisfaction in discovering ideas and viewpoints that Gabriel Fielding has described:

> The . . . enormous satisfaction . . . is the conviction that when one is writing one is about to discover something which has existed for a long, long time, but which has been hidden from knowledge. Writing to me is a voyage, an odyssey, a discovery, because I'm never certain of precisely what I will find.[1]

They also experience the difficulty of shaping ideas into articulate form and realize the risk, patience, and determination that writing requires. Consequently, they don't expect perfection in first drafts of student papers. They encourage and allow for writing processes by suspending judgment and encouraging growth of ideas in early drafts, often reading quickly two or three versions of the same paper rather than reading only a final draft.

Since research has shown that even basic writers have established composing processes, teachers should talk with their students and observe them at work before intervening with alternate approaches to composing. For too long, teachers have

tried to eradicate undesireable writing habits by forcing students to follow others, such as the outline. Regardless of the efficacy of the alternate approach, writers will be unable to make it a part of their repertoires unless integrated with the already existing processes.

In addition, effecitve teachers need to keep up with current research in composition and rhetorical theory. Much work is being done in invention and heuristics, discourse theory, revision, sentence combining, and cognition, for example, that needs to be considered in designing composition courses. An excellent place to begin reviewing such work is Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays (edited by Gary Tate, NCTE, 1976) or Research on Composing: Points of Departure (edited by Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, NCTE, 1978). However, knowledgeable teachers are aware that research is on-going, and that its results can be tentative. Most important, research needs to be considered in light of teachers' own experience and its findings applied to teachers' classes to test validity. And teachers should be questioners themselves: Do professional writers use heuristics in composing? Are they aware of such techniques? Should heuristics be taught to student writers? How and when? What role does form play in composing of professionals? In composing of teachers? How much stress should be placed on form in the classroom? The questions go on and one but are beginning steps for the kinds of inquiry teachers should be engaged in.

Finally, effective teachers realize how smoothly the work-

a-day world operates without attending to writing, certainly textbook correct writing. On one hand, society is concerned with the decline in students' verbal scores, and on the other, satisfied with the relatively minor role it assigns writing in daily activities. Writes W. Ross Winterowd in his text The Contemporary Writer:

> Most people in the real world outside of school do not need to write very much. I think, for instance, of a friend who works for the Navy: his professional writing consists of filling in forms. Another friend is a physician, and the important writing that he does, of course, is cryptic scribbling on small pieces of paper that his patients carry to the drugstore. . . . Your own experience also tells you that very few people in the real world "out there" need to write in order to be successful.[2]

Such awareness helps emphasize the need for teachers to make something of the act of writing for their students. Granted, the "basics" as defined by society must be taught. Yet of overriding importance is a more substantial view of composing that gives power and control to the writer. William E. Coles, Jr. offers such a definition when he defines the literacy associated with good writing as "the ability to conceptualize, to build structures, to draw inferences, to develop implications, to generalize intelligently, in short to make connections, to work out relationships between this idea and that idea, words and other words, sentences and other sentences, language and experience."[3]

Abilities

Successful composition teachers are able to conduct classes in accordance with knowledge gained from their own writing.

For example, they recognize the individual's need for both solitude and engagement with his audience. Teachers develop sensitivity to the times writers should be left alone and the times they need interruption; consequently, they provide writing periods in class as well as group sharing of papers. In addition, they design assignments that challenge students and that allow them to build on previous knowledge to reach new understanding.

Effective teachers realize that they communicate much about writing by their behavior in classes and in conferences. With student help, they can create an environment in which ideas and the desire to express them are encouraged. Teachers learn how to manage the classroom so students enact writing behavior rather than merely study about writing or experience dummy runs. At one time, students help each other formulate ideas; at another, read initial drafts and give accounts of their reading; and at still others, edit and evaluate. Through their ability to work with groups of students and with individuals, teachers are able to motivate writers to assume responsibility for their own learning.

Finally, of necessity, teachers assume responsibility to inform colleagues and the public of current research and help them define the "basics" of writing in substantial ways. If composition teachers wish to survive and flourish, they must reach out to audiences other than themselves.

Attitudes

James Britton and his colleagues in Great Britain have des-

cribed how attitudes of teachers toward students, students toward teachers, and both toward the act of writing are of the greatest importance in effective writing programs.[4] If teachers believe students have something important to write, if students believe teachers are interested in their ideas, if both view writing as an important activity, growth in writing is possible. My experience tells me that frequently attitudes of teachers toward themselves are the most important ones. To be effective over periods of time, teachers need to see themselves as learners in every composition course they teach. By this I mean effective teachers recognize that their teaching styles must continually evolve.

In designing courses, composition teachers can consciously evolve their styles by experimentation with different approaches to the teaching of writing, followed by careful examination of the results. Approaches can vary from those that emphasize analysis of literature, popular culture, or subjects in students' disciplines to those that favor students' experience or epistemologies, rhetorical principles, language, or prose models. With support outside the English department, interdisciplinary writing courses can be offered. Of course, many of these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, combinations can often enrich each other in a single course. Evolving a style is time-consuming and preferably teachers should teach no more than two, and at most three, writing courses a term. Then only will they have opportunity to plan and assess what they are doing.

Finally, there are less formal ways of developing teaching

styles. As I see it, the most essential element of a teaching style is the person himself or herself; development of style is really development of the person. One way of furthering style thus involves being open to one's environment. In student conferences and class discussions, in faculty exchanges and forums, in life outside the university, teachers are bombarded with new insights and ways of thinking. By being open to others and examining their ideas and lives critically, individuals make possible their own intellectual and personal growth. Carl Rogers writes in On Becoming a Person:

> If you really understand another person . . . , if you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, without any attempt to make evaluative judgments, you run the risk of being changed yourself. You might see it his way, you might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or your personality.[5]

Such growth comes only with perseverance and time, however.

Effective composition teachers should not be pawns of their schedules. They possess certain knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that allow them a measure of control over their roles as teachers and as individuals. While they are aware of what research shows, they are also open to what their own experience indicates, and they view writing in a way that encourages their continuing development and that of their students.

End Notes

[1] As quoted by Donald Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 235.

[2] W. Ross Winterowd, The Contemporary Writer (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), pp. 4,5.

[3] As quoted by Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McCelland, "Reflections on the State of the Art - An Interview with William E. Coles, Jr.," WPA, 1, No. 2 (January, 1978), 5.

[4] James Britton, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), (London: Macmillan Education, 1977), pp. 65-70.

[5] Carl Rogers, "Breakdowns in Communication," On Becoming a Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), p. 333.